

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

July 12th, 1944

DEAR MEMBER,

The Christian News-Letter about the condition of Europe has brought us a letter from Miss Violet Markham, who has rendered distinguished service in many fields of public life. I should like to quote much more of it, but the following paragraphs give the core.

THE TRIUMPHANT SPIRIT

"I entirely agree as to the folly and futility of any easy optimism about rebuilding Europe and the part we in our benevolence could play in it. But do you come across such optimism? My experience is very different. What strikes me are the gloom and depression with which most of the people I know regard the future. It is pessimism about the future, not optimism, that I fear—the danger of an impression spreading like a dim mist over men's minds that the task is too great to be compassed by human endeavour, and that once the stimulus and control of the war is removed, we shall be overwhelmed by a real *Götterdämmerung*. If that impression gets firm hold, then the outlook is black indeed, for it implies complete capitulation of the spirit.

"Look back four years and see where we stood then—a defeated, unarmed remnant, facing nothing but destruction. How came we to survive at all with every material factor against us? Only because the spirit of this people wouldn't recognize defeat and had the will to go on and to conquer our enormous obstacles. It's the same spirit, the same will that I want to see applied to the affairs of Europe. I want to see the Christian News-Letter making that appeal on the very highest level of sacrifice and endeavour—a call to the unending battle which lies ahead not only to re-establish life in Europe, but a battle against our own weariness and pessimism and that feeling of hopelessness which I see rising in so many directions. Short of such a spirit I see no future for the world.

"The Christian News-Letter is my staff and stay in the trials and perplexities of the hour. But I feel impelled to write and tell you that it doesn't seem to me enough to point out where the dangers lie; alongside of the warnings should go a call to action on the spiritual plane, the raising of an oriflamme round which the Knights of the Holy Ghost can gather."

Nothing would give us deeper satisfaction than that the Christian News-Letter should be able to contribute, in however small a degree, to the rekindling of a faith that has power to banish despair, faint-heartedness and weariness, and bring new life to the world. If we accept the obligation of doing what we can, it is not because the capacity and resources of those who produce the News-Letter are adequate to

the task, but because our membership includes many who, from very different standpoints and with very different backgrounds, are looking in the same direction as Miss Markham, and out of the mutual stimulus and enrichment of such a fellowship much may grow.

What we are seeking must be born out of the total experience of the universal Christian fellowship, as Christians everywhere in their different circumstances respond to the voice of God speaking to them in what is happening to them. It will not come from one school of thought alone, nor from one pattern of experience alone, nor from one occupational or professional group alone, nor from one nation alone. The discoveries and insights of all are needed. We are all members one of another.

Two voices have recently spoken, one American and the other French, in which one seems to hear the authentic note of Christian prophecy, and they may be allowed to make their contribution to the present discussion.

THE GOD OF HISTORY

In a short paper in *Christianity and Crisis*, Paul Tillich takes as his text and starting point the magnificent passage in Isaiah (41. 21-29) in which Jahweh through his prophet declares himself to be the God of history, knowing the beginning and the end. He has raised up Cyrus, the great destroyer of the world powers, and liberator of the remnants of the Jewish nation. The other gods are helpless and inert. Their prophets have nothing whatever to say ; they cannot utter one single word.

“Seldom in history have men been as disturbed about history as we are to-day. We urgently want to have at least a *glimpse* of the future, *some* wisdom, *some* prophecy. Not merely a few thousand Jewish exiles, as those ‘by the rivers of Babylon’ to whom our prophet speaks, but ten millions of exiles from practically all nations are trying fervently to penetrate into the darkness of their unknown future. Furthermore, the great majority of men are longing for an illuminating and profound word about the future of mankind. But those who have the power to shape the future contradict each other in practically all fundamentals. Clergy and ministers at home and in the Army are able to tell their people only in negative terms for what purpose they are sacrificing and dying. Those who must speak to the enemy (as I myself have done by radio for the hundredth time this week) realize that on the political plane they cannot say *one* word of real promise.”

We cannot expect that the darkness about our history will soon be dispersed. “Our darkness, uncertainty and helplessness about the future has profounder reasons. We cannot get an answer about the future because we ask those who cannot know the future. We ask the gods who are vanity and nought, the gods of the nations who are not the God of history. Everyone asks the god of *his* nation and tries to get an oracle from him through the mouth of his priests, the wise and mighty of the nation. We do get such oracles. We compare them with each other and try to combine them for the most probable answer. But this process increases the darkness. These gods all speak of the future in terms of their nations, but even the greatest nation is a ‘drop

in the bucket' before the God of history. No nation can say, 'I am the meaning, the purpose of history.' And no alliance of nations can say that. Even if all national gods were gathered together, they would still be subject to the judgment of Jahweh: 'You are things of nought; you can do nothing at all.' Thus it is that we get many oracles about our future, but no prophecies. We have not yet turned to the source of prophecy, the God of history."

The two great figures in the teaching of the prophet are, Cyrus, the founder of the Persian empire, the greatest historical personage of his time, who is described as the "shepherd" of God, and as the man of God's counsel, and the "Servant of Jahweh," who symbolizes the saving power of innocent suffering and death. But the mighty conqueror and founder of an empire is merely the instrument for the fulfilment of God's purposes through His Servant. He frees the remnant of Israel, and from this remnant arises the suffering Servant.

"Is not this conception the solution of the question of the meaning of history to-day? It is the only solution that I can see. There are two forces in our shattered world to-day. The one is the force of those who are similar to the suffering Servant of God. We do not know where they are, as we do not know who prompted the servant-vision of the prophet. But we know that they exist, invisibly in *all* countries. We do not know what they will make of the future. But we know that their suffering will not be in vain. They are the hidden tools of the God of history; the aged and the infants, the women and the young men, the persecuted and imprisoned, all those who are innocently sacrificed for the future, to be one small stone in the building of the divine Kingdom of which the Perfect Servant of God is the corner stone.

"And there is another force in our world, the force of those who are like unto Cyrus, the rulers of empires with all the greatness and all the shame of every empire. They are the men of God's counsel, because they carry through his purposes in the service of the suffering servants of God. But they are as ignorant of God's counsel as Cyrus was. They do not know the future consequences of their policies. If we look to them in our attempt to know the future we will also remain ignorant. But if we look at the true servants and the true God whom they serve, the God of history, we will know. Cyrus is in the service of the Servant of Jahweh. This is the solution of the riddle of history, including the history of our epoch."

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SUFFERING

The other paper is by Georges Bernanos, the distinguished French essayist and novelist, and was published in *Volontaire*, the monthly organ of the French Sword of the Spirit movement. It is a message sent from Brazil to be broadcast from Brazzaville on the Feast of St. Joan of Arc.

He pictures a man in Paris or in some far-off provincial capital spending his last hours between his chair and his palliasse in a cell lighted by night and day, with the prison rules hanging on the wall. "Maybe he is calm, as calm as he will be at dawn to-morrow when he takes a few rapid steps to reach his place at the foot of the stake under the eyes of the enemy. A Frenchman always manages to take those few

last steps. But may be too, shivering with cold and hunger, his empty head in his empty hands, his shirt clinging to his shoulders in an agony of sweat, doubting both himself and us, he is listening to the hours striking."

The man who is going to die is perhaps one of those boys of sixteen or eighteen whom the workers' resistance movement, the centre and focus of French resistance, offers to the nation by the hundred.

"Well, Frenchmen! France is not at this moment completely united behind this child who is to die, and that is the crime and the disgrace of it. The crime is that of a certain number of unworthy fallen Frenchmen who have been dishonoured and dismissed from office, but the disgrace falls on us all. The blood of this martyr will not wash it away—neither his blood nor his tears, for his tears are just as sacred, since it is right for a boy of sixteen to cry like a child before dying like a man.

"While he watches, his poor hand already hardened with toil trembling on his knees, and on his lips the words of the holy agony on Calvary, 'Why hast thou forsaken me?' he feels the reproach of French officialdom falling on him, the disdainful glance of all those eminent people to whom he will never be anything but a 'terrorist,' a hooligan. Generals, members of the Academy, archbishops—all these dignitaries whom he cannot help revering because of an age-old atavism—what has he to offer against all these gentlemen?

"You who are listening to me must reply. He sets against them the things that Joan of Arc, still more despised than he by the generals, the members of the Academy and the archbishops, set against them—his common sense, his honour and his oath.

"Frenchmen! Do not wrong me by thinking that to-day I merely wanted to paint a moving and touching picture for you; we are only too prone to shed tears over our dead—often a way of excusing ourselves from avenging them and following their lead. I ask you in your thoughts to enter with me humbly into this agony, to share its heart-rending solitude, for it is from there, as from the tabernacle of our country, that we shall be able accurately to assess our errors, our faults, the immediate punishment and future reconciliations."

We have every reason, as the day of military victory draws nearer, to ponder the profound truths brought to our attention in these two papers. If we are to avoid the awful danger of being carried away by pride into courses that will in the end prove fatal, we need to lay continually to heart the repeated warnings of Christ about the gulf which separates human estimates from the ultimate truth of things.

The fund for the extension of the work of the Christian Frontier now stands at £432 8s. Ninety-five of our members have sent contributions.

I am about to take a holiday. The next two News-Letters will be written by my colleague, Mrs. Bliss.

Yours sincerely,

D. H. Deacon

CHRISTIANITY AND POWER

When General Smuts in his address to the Empire Parliamentary Association said that the great lesson that this war has taught us is that we cannot get away from the problem of power, he was expressing an idea that has found wide and deep lodgment in the minds of men to-day. Already before the war millions of people, more particularly on the continent of Europe, had come to believe that history is the struggle of competing vital forces to which ethical considerations are irrelevant. Not only was this proclaimed by influential thinkers, but the conviction began to spread widely among the masses that existence in modern society is governed, not by reason and justice, but by blind and irrational forces.

It is essential for Christian thought to come to terms with this question of power and, though the subject has already been treated in the News-Letter,¹ no excuse is needed for a further attempt to clarify the issues.

POWER AS A NATURAL FACT

Power in its simplest meaning is the ability to do something or to act on some person or thing. As such it is inseparable from existence and life. To exist is to possess some measure of power, if only as resistance to the exercise of other power. All life is a manifestation of power, pushing its way forward, claiming room, seeking its place in the sun.

Life is everywhere in competition with life. Growth takes place at the expense of other growth. This rivalry of power with power is fundamental to existence as we know it. The underlying presence and operation of these incalculable vital forces makes the life of every civilization precarious.

Power as a fact of existence is not in itself evil any more than life is evil. Men are dependent at every turn on power in nature and in their fellow-men. The excellence of a few can minister to the advancement of all. Civilization must have its men of skill, its pioneers, its heroes, its sages.

THE WILL TO POWER

In man the rivalry for power acquires a new dimension. It becomes the will to power. Man has a capacity for the infinite. His desires are boundless. Made in the image of God he can aspire to be as God. The capacity to misuse power in the satisfaction of

¹ e.g. in the Supplements to C.N.L. Nos. 190 and 196.

an insatiable ambition invests it with a demonic quality. When man forgets that he is a responsible and social being, and attempts to make himself or his group the lord and centre of everything, human society, as we see to-day, is shaken to its foundations.

POWER IN SOCIETY

In the relations of men with one another in society the desire for fuller life and enhanced power is the main driving force. But into the problem of power in society two further factors enter.

In the first place, men are able through association enormously to increase their power. What the individual could never achieve by himself may be accomplished by collective power. Where men combine to achieve a purpose, there must of necessity be leaders and followers, and men are willing to surrender the personal exercise of power for the sake of the increased sense of power that comes from belonging to a powerful group, party or nation. As Bertrand Russell has pointed out,¹ men strive for power so long as they believe in their own competence to handle a business, but when they know themselves to be incompetent they prefer to follow a leader more capable than themselves.

Secondly, society imposes limits on the individual's impulse to power. It establishes law and order as a bulwark against anarchy. In order to do this it *confers* power on chosen individuals, placing them in positions of authority, in which they are entrusted with responsibility for the lives, interests and welfare of others. Social power is at one and the same time power *over* and power *for*.

With the idea of authority there is introduced a conception quite different from that of power. Power as a fact of existence is now combined with the idea of responsibility and moral obligation. The questions of authority and of the source from which it is derived are too large for discussion here. For our present purpose it is sufficient to emphasize the fundamental distinction between authority and power.

But since power *for* nearly always carries with it, in greater or less degree, also power *over*, the exercise of authority is apt to stimulate and feed the impulse to power which is implanted in human nature. It is as a rule those in whom the love of power is strong who push their way into positions of power. The holders of power are under constant temptation to use their position to further their own interests. There may be individuals who in office are guided by a disinterested desire to serve their fellow-men, but history shows that the class in a community which holds the reins of power uses the position to its own advantage. Those who wield

¹ *Power*, p. 17. Allen & Unwin, 7s. 6d. (Reprinting).

power may serve the commonwealth, but they serve themselves as well.¹

Power in society can assume many forms. There is political power, military power, social power, economic power, power of prestige, power of thought, power of persuasion, power of personality, and these interpenetrate and mutually support one another. Power is often at its peak when it is least obvious, because it is accorded willing submission. Political power is most stable when it is sustained by unquestioned tradition and custom, or when the ruling class serves so successfully the interests of the whole that its leadership is desired and valued. It is only when these supports break down that the necessity arises of recourse to naked power or brute compulsion.

THE NEW REALISM

For two centuries or more the working faith of the western world has been a belief in the inevitability of human progress. Men had an unshaken confidence that the world was amenable to the control and direction of human reason. They turned a blind eye to the irrational forces in the life of the world, and largely ignored the part played by power in human affairs. No one could deny that imperfection, injustice, misery and suffering abounded; but it was confidently believed that they could be progressively overcome. Whatever the set-backs, truth and right would in the end prevail.

It is certainly our task as men to extend the sway of reason and justice. It would be foolish to set limits to what may yet be achieved in the control of the forces of nature and of man's own destiny and in the establishment of a just and rational order. Man, as a rational being, has the power to go on learning from his mistakes. But this does not alter the fact that life is everywhere in rivalry with other life and that, whatever social equilibrium may be achieved, the balance may be upset by new claimants for power who will not rest until they have ousted those who hold it and taken their place. The belief in inevitable progress, which was long the fashion, was masked also by a quite astonishing disregard of the fact that in human society the struggle for power is intensified by a twist and perversion of man's nature, which leads him to strive to make himself the centre of his world, and thereby to fall a prey to pride and to provoke the nemesis that follows relentlessly on human presumption.

¹ While it is common for men to abuse power, they may also fall into the opposite fault of evading the responsibilities of power. In the desire for ease and a quiet life, they may sacrifice the public interest by refraining from using the powers entrusted to them.

All this is so widely recognized that it seems scarcely worth repeating. The current of realism is in full spate. To call attention to the weaknesses of rationalistic optimism might seem a wasted labour of preaching to the converted, were it not that in the Anglo-Saxon world, and not least in religious circles, the old habits of thought show an extraordinary persistence. How else can we explain the continued widespread belief in the efficacy of declarations of aims and blue-prints of a new order?

We shall never deal effectively with the problem of power until we have rid ourselves of the illusion of an identity or close correspondence between men's conscious aims and their actual behaviour. Many illustrations might be given of the extent to which the two may diverge. One of the most telling may be found in Dr. Borkenau's *Socialism, National or International*.¹ Writing in full sympathy with the ideals of labour, he shows that, while on every occasion the socialist movement has proclaimed its unqualified adherence to internationalism, socialists in different countries have over and over again bowed to nationalist trends because the interests of their constituency made it imperative. The real forces ran clean counter to the cherished ideals.

When an aspect of reality is ignored, it sooner or later reasserts itself. The greater and longer the neglect, the more violent and exaggerated is likely to be the reaction. The doctrine of historical materialism and the discoveries of modern psychology have brought home to men generally how largely history is shaped by other factors than men's conscious aims. It would be folly to ignore the extent to which these ideas have affected the modern outlook. A significant sign of the times is James Burnham's new book, *The Macchiavellians*.² The modern thinkers, whose doctrines he expounds, all start from the assumption that the primary real goal of every ruling group is the maintenance of its own power and privilege. The view that the ruling factors in human affairs are self-interest and the struggle for power is one which has already gained wide acceptance among the masses, since much in their actual experience seems to confirm it. If it were to prevail, the consequences would be as fatal to civilization, and as complete a contradiction of all that Christians believe, as would a Nazi domination of the world.

We can, however, successfully combat these false doctrines only if we recognize that they assert in disastrous isolation elements of truth which have been too long ignored. There is nothing that need perplex or disturb Christians in the modern discovery that man is a fallen being, capable of misusing for destructive purposes the life and power that have been given him.

¹ Routledge, 5s.

² Putnam, 7s. 6d.

GOD—CREATOR AND JUDGE

The errors of a false realism can be met and overcome only by a deeper realism that does greater justice to the facts. The pretensions of power cannot be disposed of by painting utopias or proclaiming ideals. The forces of life go on their way regardless of our speculations, programmes, aspirations and hopes. Pronouncements and resolutions by which we seek to bind them are wisps of straw. Aberrations and abuses of power can be restrained only by action in the real world by those who have a better understanding of its true nature. The battle has to be fought not in the sphere of what ought to be, but in the sphere of what *is*.

The first and fundamental issue to be decided, if we want to be realists, is whether God is.

If God is Creator there is a divinely appointed constitution of things to which men have to conform. Violation of this order can lead only to self-destruction and disaster. History is strewn with the broken monuments of man's pride. It vindicates the assurance of the writers of the Bible that whatever man's pretensions to power "the Lord will laugh at him."

If man is in his essential nature a being responsible to God, power, whether it be his individual endowment or the authority entrusted to him, is not an opportunity for self-aggrandisement, but a trust of which he has to give an account.

Since God is unseen and His judgments are slow in their operation, a society which knows man to be a responsible being, accountable to God for all his acts, will do its utmost to make those who wield power accountable in this earthly life to their fellow-men.

When entrusted with power in a public office, the Christian can view as realistically as anyone the power factors with which he has to reckon. He need be under no illusions about the selfish and power-seeking motives by which the actions of those around him are prompted. He is aware that these motives are operative in some degree in himself and in the class, party or nation which he represents. He knows it to be his duty, taking full account of all the factors involved, to choose among the possibilities open to him the course which seems to him to be the nearest approximation to the demands of justice and best calculated to promote human welfare. It is by such individual acts of faithfulness, and by the example which they set, that power is made increasingly responsible and God's will for righteousness fulfilled.

COMMUNITY

Secondly, it is the plainest fact of human experience that reality is not constituted in a way that permits individuals or groups to gratify their unlimited desire for power, since such ambitions come into inevitable collision with similar desires of other individuals and groups. Reality is in its fundamental nature social. The unrestrained pursuit of power is for this reason doomed to frustration.

Nor, even if it succeeds for a time, can it satisfy man's deepest longings. Since he is in his essential nature a social being, he can find lasting satisfaction only in communion with others. He can develop the potentialities of his being only through intercourse with those who are different from himself. All self-regarding pursuit of power tends to create a solitary universe; in proportion as differences, and the contradictions inherent in them, are crushed out of existence, life becomes progressively impoverished.

The knowledge of the social nature of reality is always present as a factor in determining men's actions. The desire for power is accompanied and tempered by a desire to enter into relations with other life, to give and take, to live and let live. No human situation is *merely* a struggle for power. The struggle is always tinged, and is capable of being in an indefinite degree transformed, by other influences. In all human affairs, reason, justice, toleration, goodwill and human affections play their part.

The true realist is one who knows that man attains his true life in association and fellowship, and in the exercise of the virtues which these demand. Consequently, without losing sight of the realities of the struggle for power, he sees it as his task to ally himself with, and to strengthen, all the influences which humanize that struggle and further justice, co-operation and goodwill.

THE RENUNCIATION OF POWER

If it is clear that the satisfaction of man's nature cannot be found in the unlimited pursuit of power, are we to draw the conclusion that salvation lies in the complete renunciation of power?

The surrender of power under external compulsion or as the result of inward feebleness and ebbing vitality is not salvation, but defeat. The renunciation of power can have a positive meaning only if it is the manifestation not of exhaustion but of abundance of life. "It would then," as Paul Tillich has said, "be the expression, not of impotence, but of the highest might. If there were such a possibility, then the problem of power would have received a new dimension."

Buddhism advocates the renunciation of power by complete withdrawal from the struggle of existence, the vanity of which has been perceived by those who have penetrated to the truth of things.

Christianity also compels us to face the possibility of the renunciation of power by presenting us with a fact in history in which the ultimate meaning of human life is claimed to be revealed, and the weakness of God is declared to be stronger than men. It does not, however, draw the conclusion that this demands from Christians withdrawal from life. In contrast with Buddhism, Christianity claims to be not the negation but the fulfilment of life. It insists on maintaining the tension between the *acceptance* of life, and consequently of power, as God's gift, and the *renunciation* of it.

History is essentially the sphere of competing vitalities and consequently a structure of might and power. To renounce power completely in this sphere is to sacrifice existence. The renunciation of power by Christ in the super-abundance of His supernatural life meant complete defencelessness against the powers of this world and the extinction of His earthly existence. It needs to be clearly seen that the renunciation of power carries us into a sphere beyond history.

Failure to understand the paradoxical nature of the renunciation of power leads to the error of supposing that the way of the Cross offers a direct and simple solution of the problems of the social and political struggle. A powerful case can be made for the pacifist attitude towards war—a far more powerful case than most of those engrossed by the desperate struggle for national existence are willing to recognize. But the case as commonly presented fails to come to grips with the fact that the struggle for power cannot be eliminated from history, and is therefore quite unconvincing to those for whom that fact is part of God's ordering of the world. Christ's kingdom is not of this world. The complete renunciation of power is the end, as well as the fulfilment, of history.

But since in Christ the transcendent meaning of history has been revealed, this ultimate meaning exerts its influence over the whole range of human life. "In every power," to quote Tillich once more, "there is an element of renunciation of power." This is the vitalizing element in the endeavour to achieve justice and equality, in which power is limited for the sake of others, and in every manifestation of self-sacrificing love. The acknowledgement of the rule of law in a constitutional State is in a very profound sense an expression of the renunciation of power.

The Church is in principle the society of those who have freely decided to have power only in the form of the renunciation of power.

The sharp contrast which Christ drew between the new society which He founded and the societies of this world turns precisely on this distinction.

But because of the tension between this life and the life to come, the forms in which Christians are called to serve God in this world will be varied. To some the call will come to renounce all that this world offers and to follow literally in the footsteps of Christ. But there are many services of which men stand in need that can be rendered only by those who take their part in the ordinary activities of society by which men are fed and housed and educated and governed.

Those who serve in this way are involved inevitably in the struggle for power. For them a complete and literal renunciation of power is impossible. If Christian parents give their children a superior education in the hope that they may be thereby equipped to serve more effectively their fellow-men, that is to confer on them a form of power. In the sphere of public activity no policy can be brought to fulfilment except by capturing and holding place and power. Those who are entrusted with social or political power cannot in their public office act in defiance of the intentions of those who appointed them. A Christian statesman may not sacrifice the vital interests of his country, though he may rightly press upon his fellow-citizens the necessity of good faith and fair dealing. The Christian in public life has to endure the continual tension between the acceptance and exercise of power, under all the limitations imposed by the human struggle for power, and the increasing inward renunciation of power as he grows into conformity with the mind of Christ.

J. H. O.

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